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ABSTRACT

A set of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) lessons is presented that is geared to the needs of reluctant writers, especially those with limited English proficiency. The approach has been used successfully with grades 2-6. The plan has seven steps: (1) an oral performance by the teacher using a key word and a series of unrelated sentences in which the word appears; (2) a yes/no question-and-answer session using the same key word, with questions directed to the whole group; (3) elicitation of sentences from students, each of which must differ from those of other students (the sentences are typed as they are produced); (4) reading the sentences as a group; (5) illustrating the sentences for use in an exhibit, with pictures; (6) writing or dictating stories about the pictures; and (7) reading the stories together. This seven-step process, which emphasizes spontaneity, collaboration, and working toward an appealing product, lays the foundation for further work and encourages students to write. (MSE)

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A Word Is Worth a Thousand Pictures: A Writing Project for the Primary Grades

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A technique is described which enables the beginning ESL student to produce an appealing finished writing product in a short time in a stress-free learning environment. Individual ideas are nurtured in a collective setting. The technique has proven effective with children from second to sixth grade and lends itself well to writing instruction that emphasizes free expression and creativity.

Within every ESL class, some students are more proficient in English than others. Some students quickly open up and reveal their opinions with or without adequate language tools. By contrast, some students have mainly a passive knowledge of English and are reluctant to speak or write. And many have the double handicap of low English proficiency coupled with a general reluctance to verbalize even in their native tongues. (Those who read at grade level with good comprehension and who are articulate in English are likely to be removed from ESL classes.) The technique for teaching writing in the primary grades which I will describe in this article is a technique that is especially well suited to those students who are reluctant to express themselves.

I would like to present here a set of lessons which is geared to the needs of reluctant writers, especially those with low English proficiency.

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THE PLAN: SEVEN STEPS

Step 1: An oral performance by the teacher

The first step in the lessons involves a key word chosen by the teacher and an unrelated series of sentences in which the key word appears. I choose a word which is not a proper noun or a verb. Common nouns and adjectives are best. The word must be familiar to the entire group and it must be one that can elicit many associations. Words such as the following are well suited to the activity:

Nouns		Adjectives	
bike	friend	afraid	favorite
birthday	garden	brave	huge
cats	neighbor	cold	sick
fishing	vacation	famous	yellow

I show the students the written word on a large card which is displayed in a central place. I do not use pictures; I feel that a picture is superfluous and may in fact stifle the children's imagination. The well-chosen word conjures up mental pictures on its own.

After displaying the word, I say to the students, "Today I will show you how I can take one word and turn it into many sentences. Soon, you will be able to do the same thing." Then I begin to speak extemporaneously. I utter sentence after sentence, each containing the chosen word. The students are bombarded with at least twenty disjointed sentences which I say as rapidly as I can, without notes. (Teachers who are hesitant about trying this may want to use notes; it may not be easy for a teacher not used to the technique to come up with a long series of sentences with the key word.) I deliberately avoid getting into a set pattern of beginnings or endings because I wish to highlight the word, not a particular sentence pattern. If the key word is *vacation*, my sentences might be:

> Vacations are fun.
> I have just finished my vacation.
> My best vacation took place three years ago in Canada.

My husband and I took a vacation together this year.
Everybody should take a vacation at least once a year.
Most vacations are in summer.
Sometimes you ask for a vacation.
Vacations cost money.
I saw lakes and rivers on my vacation.
I rode in three boats on my last vacation.
You can take a trip or stay home on your vacation.
Children like to go to camp on vacation.
I love to swim during my vacation.
Friends can visit me when they have their vacations.

This teacher performance--with seeming indifference to onlookers--is a long solo for a teacher who professes a belief in interactive teaching. My rationale is simply that it works. For one thing, the very fact that it is an unusual way of using language makes it interesting to the children. It also gives the children an opportunity to see the teacher thinking, creating, and having fun with words. Like Tom Sawyer whitewashing the fence, I lure the children into curiosity and a willingness to join in the fun. I present them with words to stimulate a pageant of visuals that emerges out of their own minds. I make them realize that--to reverse the aphorism--a word is worth a thousand pictures. As I reel off sentence after sentence, I can see by the expressions on their faces that they are actively imagining the many scenes that my sentences suggest. I gesture and change my tone and expression often, but I use no pictures or props.

In this step, I don't expect every child to understand every word. My language is usually simple, but not always. The important thing is that my performance is understandable enough to pique interest and evoke mental images.

Step 2: Yes/no questions

In the second step, I ask yes/no questions, again using the key word. The questions are directed to the group as a whole. The children answer out loud, spontaneously but not chorally. There are no anticipated correct answers, and I don't respond to answers. In this step I use written questions (not seen by the children) to assist me. I go from one question to the next without

hesitation and without discussion. Questions for the word *vacation* might be:

Do you like vacations?
Did you ever go on a trip during your vacation?
Does your mother like taking vacations?
Do we go to school on vacations?
Do you go fishing (swimming, to the library) during vacation?
Is there a vacation during winter?
Are vacations one week?
Are vacations one year?
Are vacations sad?

Why don't I respond to the answers? I want the students to feel that they are not being evaluated at this point, that "anything goes," including shouting "No way!" when others are shouting "Yes!" They may use one-word answers, they may use slang, they may blurt out comments as they wish. I can see by their diverse answers and by the increased forcefulness of their voices that they are listening to me, responding honestly, and thinking about their personal experiences. Who says that every utterance must be significant and must be met instantly with a concerned remark? Certainly not the children. Anything that smacks of additional play time or experimentation time, with a little raucousness to boot, is a treat for them.

In this phase, I try to assure the students that they won't be instantaneously categorized and judged by their speech. When I begin to respond in the next step, they are usually eager for a reaction and curious to see how I receive their friends' remarks as well as their own.

Step 3: Sentences from students

In the third step, each student must say one sentence that is somehow different from those of the other students. Students are permitted to repeat a sentence from the original teacher performance in step one, but no two students may repeat the same sentence. The students are to listen to each other and to avoid mimicry. Soon they become very adept at attributing "ownership" to sentences and at finding ways to achieve the

required variation. They comment, "I said that one" or "Chue said that already!" When they falter, unable to come up with a sentence using the key word, I give them clues: "Think of things you have heard...seen...gotten...liked...bought...." In this step, the children begin to discover that they, like the teacher, are capable of using words creatively. Even as they are constrained by the need to use the key word, they stretch their imaginations in the effort for novelty.

In this step, variation in thought or sentence structure is given special praise. This is the point at which I respond to each contribution with some comment or question:

> Child A: I like to go fishing on vacation.
> Teacher: That sounds like fun! Do you know how to fish?
> [I don't pursue the subject further. A comment or question or two will suffice.]
>
> Child B: I sleep at my cousin's house during vacation.
> Teacher: That's always nice. Where does your cousin live?
>
> Child C: On Christmas vacation we went to our sponsors'.
> Teacher: You're telling me something new and different. Most people take vacations in the summer. But some people take them in the winter. And you're remembering a winter vacation.

As the students produce sentences, I type them on a primary typewriter (a typewriter that produces extra-large type), spacing the lines so that the sentences may be cut apart with scissors later.

Step 4: Reading the sentences together

We read the sentences aloud. My favorite technique is to xerox the sentences, make a transparency, and flash it on the wall. Together, we read the sentences aloud very slowly, sounding out the more difficult words.

Step 5: Illustrating the sentences for an exhibit

I cut out each one of the sentences which have been typed on the xeroxed sheet and then every child picks one or more

sentences to illustrate for our bulletin board exhibit. I tell them that their pictures should not be alike. If there are eight children, then the pictures should reflect eight different sentences. Usually both the pictures and the sentences are quite different. Once when *vacation* was the key word, we had a bulletin board with a pool, a fishing scene, a picnic, a park, California, the zoo, a garden, summer school, a visit to Grandma, baking cookies, and traveling in a car.

Step 6: Writing based on the pictures

When the pictures are completed, I ask the students to write about the pictures. I give them a choice: they may do their own writing or they may dictate to me. If they dictate to me, I type their "story," and they copy what I have typed. Primary students often cannot retain their thoughts long enough to record them, especially when the act of writing is laborious. They can copy, however, when relieved of the responsibility of holding on to their ideas. And the ideas remain theirs alone: I do not contribute ideas as I type. I do edit for minor corrections, doing so out loud, discussing each correction with the child.

When the students submit their stories or dictate to me, I avoid negative critiquing. I make no attempt to teach structure beyond the insistence on complete sentences, capitals, and end-of-sentence punctuation. I do not try to teach coherence and organization at this juncture. I do expect that the students' words will fit their pictures and not contradict what they have drawn. In this sense, the "stories" are meaningful and tied to a context. Imaginative students sometimes add a dialogue, labels, humorous asides, background thoughts, or intriguing insights. To a picture of someone who is having bad luck, for example, a student might add a "dialogue balloon" with the words "Oh, no, not again!"

Here is an example of a "story" produced by a student to go with a picture of a family riding in their car, with the caption "My father and mother and my family traveled in the car":

We went to the park. We played with a ball. We went fishing too.

Another example accompanied a picture of a visit to the zoo which was captioned "I was happy when my mom and dad took me to the zoo this vacation":

> My mom bought some pop for me and my dad. It was a hot day. My dad took me to see the seals. Then my father bought some fish food. We threw it to the seals.

Step 7: Reading the "stories" together

The students read their writing to each other, showing the pictures and making comments. We often play the "I like" game: "I like Teng's sentence about..." or "I like the funny ears on his elephant." The children then help me arrange the display of pictures and "stories." The key word that began the series of lessons captions the exhibit. The end product is a collective collage of ideas in which the children take pride.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As our students advance, their needs change. They need to learn how to organize their thoughts, how to capture and hold the reader's attention, and how to write with appropriate style and grammar. I branch out to these skills with each student when he or she is ready. The seven-step project, as described here, helps lay the foundation for further work. With its emphasis on spontaneity, experiences related to the students' lives, a collaborative effort, a realistic short-term goal, and an appealing end product, it can help transform the reluctant writer into a beginning writer who is eager to write on.
□

The author

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